

The Center for Grassroots Oversight

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EVENTS

1986-1993: CIA and Bin Laden Both Closely Tied to Recruiting and Fund-Raising Office for Afghanistan



Fawaz Damra. [Source: Associated Press]

By the mid-1980s, Osama bin Laden and his mentor Abdullah Azzam jointly founded a charity front based in Pakistan which is called Maktab al-Khidamat (MAK) (which means “services office”) and is also known as Al-Kifah (which means “struggle”) (see 1984). Branches start to open in the US; the first one apparently opens in Tucson, Arizona, where al-Qaeda has a sleeper cell (see 1986). But around 1986, Khaled Abu el-Dahab, the right hand man of double agent Ali Mohamed, informally founds the branch in Brooklyn, New York, and it soon becomes the most important US branch. (Weiser, Sachs, and Kocieniewski 10/22/1998; Burr and Collins 2006, pp. 269-270) On December 29, 1987, three men, Mustafa Shalabi, Fawaz Damra, and Ali Shinawy, formally file papers incorporating Al-Kifah, which is called the Al-Kifah Refugee Center. At first, it is located inside the Al Farouq mosque, which is led by Damra. But eventually it will get its own office space next to the mosque. Shalabi, a naturalized citizen from Egypt, runs the office with two assistants: Mahmud Abouhalima, who will later be convicted for a role in

bombing the World Trade Center in 1993 (see February 26, 1993), and El Sayyid Nosair, who will assassinate a Jewish leader in New York in 1990 (see November 5, 1990). (Mitchell 4/11/1993; Hosenball 10/1/2001; Sullivan, Garrett, and Rutchick 11/4/2001) Jamal al-Fadl, a founding member of al-Qaeda and future FBI informant (see June 1996-April 1997), also works at the Al-Kifah Refugee Center in its early days. (Miller, Stone, and Mitchell 2002, pp. 155) The Brooklyn office recruits Arab immigrants and Arab-Americans to go fight in Afghanistan, even after the Soviets withdraw in early 1989. As many as 200 are sent there from the office. Before they go, the office arranges training in the use of rifles, assault weapons, and handguns, and then helps them with visas, plane tickets, and contacts. They are generally sent to the MAK/Al-Kifah office in Peshawar, Pakistan, and then connected to either the radical Afghan faction led by Abdul Rasul Sayyaf or the equally radical one led by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar. (Mitchell 4/11/1993) The CIA has some murky connection to Al-Kifah that has yet to be fully explained. Newsweek will later say the Brooklyn office “doubled as a recruiting post for the CIA seeking to steer fresh troops to the mujaheddin” fighting in Afghanistan. At the same time, the Brooklyn office is where “veterans of [the Afghan war arrived] in the United States—many with passports arranged by the CIA.” (Hosenball 10/1/2001) Robert I. Friedman, writing for New York magazine, will comment that the Brooklyn office was a refuge for ex- and future mujaheddin, “But the highlight for the center’s regulars were the inspirational jihad lecture series, featuring CIA-sponsored speakers.... One week on Atlantic Avenue, it might be a CIA-trained Afghan rebel traveling on a CIA-issued visa; the next, it might be a clean-cut Arabic-speaking Green Beret, who would lecture about the importance of being part of the mujaheddin, or ‘warriors of the Lord.’ The more popular lectures were held upstairs in the roomier Al-Farouq Mosque; such was the case in 1990 when Sheikh [Omar] Abdul-Rahman, traveling on a CIA-supported visa, came to town.” One frequent instructor is double agent Ali Mohamed, who is in the US Special Forces at the time (see 1987-1989). Bin Laden’s mentor Azzam frequently visits and lectures in the area. In 1988, he tells “a rapt crowd of several hundred in Jersey City, ‘Blood and martyrdom are the only way to create a Muslim society.... However, humanity won’t allow us to achieve this objective, because all humanity is the enemy of every Muslim.’” (Friedman 3/17/1995) Ayman Al-Zawahiri, future Al-Qaeda second in command, makes a recruiting trip to the office in 1989 (see Spring 1993).

(Wright 9/9/2002) The Brooklyn office also raises a considerable amount of money for MAK/Al-Kifah back in Pakistan. The Independent will later call the office “a place of pivotal importance to Operation Cyclone, the American effort to support the mujaheddin. The Al-Kifah [Refugee Center was] raising funds and, crucially, providing recruits for the struggle, with active American assistance.” (Marshall 11/1/1998) Abdul-Rahman, better known as the “Blind Sheikh,” is closely linked to bin Laden. In 1990, he moves to New York on another CIA-supported visa (see July 1990) and soon dominates the Al-Kifah Refugee Center. Shalabi has a falling out with him over how to spend the money they raise and he is killed in mysterious circumstances in early 1991, completing Abdul-Rahman’s take over. Now, both the Brooklyn and Pakistan ends of the Al-Kifah/MAK network are firmly controlled by bin Laden and his close associates. In 1998, the US government will say that al-Qaeda’s “connection to the United States evolved from the Al-Kifah Refugee Center.” Yet there is no sign that the CIA stops its relationship with the Brooklyn office before it closes down shortly after the 1993 WTC bombing. (Weiser, Sachs, and Kocieniewski 10/22/1998)

Late 1980s and After: CIA Blocks Investigations into Al-Qaeda’s ‘Operational Headquarters’ in US



Robert Morgenthau.
[Source: Robert Maass / Corbis]

In the late 1980s, Osama bin Laden and his mentor Abdullah Azzam are running a charity front called Maktab al-Khidamat (MAK)/Al-Kifah in Peshawar, Pakistan, and it has an important branch in Brooklyn, New York, called the Al-Kifah Refugee Center that is sending money and recruits to fight in Afghanistan. The CIA apparently helps the Al-Kifah Brooklyn office send up to 200 people from the US to fight in Afghanistan (see 1986-1993). Many of them are US citizens. Zalmay Khalilzad, a State Department Afghan specialist who will go on to become a prominent neoconservative, will later deny knowing of any Arab-Americans fighting with the mujaheddin. But one anonymous Congressional aide will recall occasional mentions of Al-Kifah Refugee Center or its head Mustafa Shalabi by some of the most radical mujaheddin. He will say: “Among that cabal, the extreme militant fringes, Shalabi was known.... [T]hey were asking to talk to him so he could organize some particular assistance.” The Neutrality Act prevents US citizens from fighting against countries not at war with the US, but the New York Times will note, “Yet there is no sign that a criminal investigation ever took place even though federal agents had come across

broad hints about the center’s activities when they investigated the [Meir] Kahane assassination [in 1990] (see November 5, 1990) and the slaying of Mr. Shalabi [in 1991]” (see (February 28, 1991)). Kahane’s assassin, El Sayyid Nosair, was one of Shalabi’s assistants. (Mitchell 4/11/1993) Apparently the CIA’s ties to the Al-Kifah Refugee Center prevent other US agencies from investigating it, even after the 1993 World Trade Center bombing, when all of the bombers are found to have been tied to the center. While Al-Kifah closes itself down shortly after the WTC bombing, it immediately reopens in Boston under a different name and continues to publish the same newsletter and post from the same website (see April 1993-Mid-2003). Robert I. Friedman, writing for New York magazine, will comment, “[W]hen the fanatical fervor [the CIA] whipped up leads to unintended consequences—the assassination of a Jewish militant leader in Manhattan, the bombing of the World Trade Center, a terror conspiracy to blow up the Holland and Lincoln Tunnels and other Manhattan landmarks—[the CIA tried] to discourage local law enforcement agencies and the FBI from looking into the matter too deeply.” After Nosair assassinates Kahane, the FBI tells District Attorney Robert Morgenthau that Nosair was a lone gunman, not part of a broader conspiracy. However, the FBI had truckloads of evidence connecting to Al-Kifah strongly suggesting otherwise that it does not closely investigate. The FBI also blocks him from tying Sheikh Omar Abdul-Rahman to the WTC bombing (see After February 26, 1993). Morgenthau will later speculate the CIA may have encouraged the FBI not to pursue any other leads. “The FBI lied to me,” he will say. “They’re supposed to untangle terrorist connections, but they can’t be trusted to do the job.” (Friedman 3/17/1995) Counterterrorism expert Steven Emerson will call Al-Kifah “al-Qaeda’s operational headquarters in the United States.” (Emerson 2006, pp. 436) In 1994, a secret internal CIA report will conclude that the agency is “partially culpable” for the WTC bombing because of its support for radicals connected to Al-Kifah. One CIA source will say, “By giving these people the funding that we did, a situation was created in which it could be safely argued that we bombed the World Trade Center” (see January 24, 1994). But even after 1994 there is little evidence that the links from Al-Kifah were carefully explored by any US government agency. For instance, the government will not freeze Al-Kifah’s funds until shortly after 9/11, long after it ceased to exist (see September 24, 2001).

July 1990: ‘Blind Sheikh’ Enters US Despite Being on Terrorist Watch List, Takes Over Al-Kifah

Despite being on a US terrorist watch list for three years, radical Muslim leader Sheikh Omar Abdul-Rahman enters the US on a “much-disputed” tourist visa issued by an undercover CIA agent. (Friedman 3/30/1993; Weaver 5/1996; Lance 2003, pp. 42) Abdul-Rahman was heavily involved with the CIA and Pakistani ISI efforts to

defeat the Soviets in Afghanistan, and became famous traveling all over the world for five years recruiting new fighters for the Afghan war. The CIA gave him visas to come to the US starting in 1986 (see December 15, 1986-1989). However, he never hid his prime goals to overthrow the governments of the US and Egypt. (Weaver 5/1996) FBI agent Tommy Corrigan will later say that prior to Abdul-Rahman's arrival, "terrorism for all intents and purposes didn't exist in the United States. But [his] arrival in 1990 really stoke the flames of terrorism in this country. This was a major-league ballplayer in what at the time was a minor-league ballpark. He was... looked up to worldwide. A mentor to bin Laden, he was involved with the MAK over in Pakistan." The charity front Maktab al-Khidamat (MAK) is also known as Al-Kifah, and it has a branch in Brooklyn known as the Al-Kifah Refugee Center. The head of that branch, Mustafa Shalabi, picks up Abdul-Rahman at the airport when he first arrives and finds an apartment for him. Abdul-Rahman soon begins preaching at Al Farouq mosque, which is in the same building as the Al-Kifah office, plus two other locals mosques, Abu Bakr and Al Salaam. (Lance 2006, pp. 53) He quickly turns Al-Kifah into his "de facto headquarters." (Weaver 5/1996) He is "infamous throughout the Arab world for his alleged role in the assassination of Egyptian president Anwar Sadat." Abdul-Rahman immediately begins setting up a militant Islamic network in the US. (Friedman 3/30/1993) He is believed to have befriended bin Laden while in Afghanistan, and bin Laden secretly pays Abdul-Rahman's US living expenses. (Weaver 5/1996; ABC News 8/16/2002) For the next two years, Abdul-Rahman will continue to exit and reenter the US without being stopped or deported, even though he is still on the watch list (see Late October 1990-October 1992).



Sheikh Omar Abdul-Rahman.
[Source: FBI]

Late October 1990-October 1992: 'Blind Sheikh' Able to Repeatedly Leave and Reenter US Despite Being on Watch List

In July 1990, the "Blind Sheikh," Sheikh Omar Abdul-Rahman, was mysteriously able to enter the US and remain there despite being a well known public figure and being on a watch list for three years (see July 1990).

- In late October 1990, he travels to London, so he is out of the US when one of his followers assassinates the Zionist rabbi Meir Kahane on November 5, 1990 (see November 5, 1990). He returns to the US in mid-November under the name "Omar Ahmed Rahman" and again has no trouble getting back in despite still being on the watch list. (Duke 7/13/1993)
 - The State Department revokes his US visa on November 17 after the FBI informs it that he is in the US. (McKinley 12/16/1990)
 - In December 1990, Abdul-Rahman leaves the US again to attend an Islamic conference in Copenhagen, Denmark. He returns nine days later and again has no trouble reentering, despite not even having a US visa at this point. (Duke 7/13/1993)
 - On December 16, 1990, the New York Times publishes an article titled, "Islamic Leader on US Terrorist List Is in Brooklyn," which makes his presence in the US publicly known. The Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) is said to be investigating why he has not been deported already. (McKinley 12/16/1990)
 - Yet in April 1991, the INS approves his application for permanent residence.
 - He then leaves the US again in June 1991 to go on the religious hajj to Mecca, Saudi Arabia, and returns on July 31, 1991. INS officials identify him coming in, but let him in anyway. (Mitchell 4/24/1993; Duke 7/13/1993)
 - In June 1992, his application for political asylum will be turned down and his permanent residence visa revoked. But INS hearings on his asylum bid are repeatedly delayed and still have not taken place when the WTC is bombed in February 1993 (see February 26, 1993). (Lance 2003, pp. 105-106)
 - Abdul-Rahman then goes to Canada around October 1992 and returns to the US yet again. The US and Canada claim to have no documentation on his travel there, but numerous witnesses in Canada see him pray and lecture there. Representative Charles Schumer (D-NY) says, "Here they spent all this time trying to get him out. He goes to Canada and gives them the perfect reason to exclude him and they don't."
 - After the WTC bombing, the US could detain him pending his deportation hearing but chooses not to, saying it would be too costly to pay for his medical bills. (Mitchell 4/24/1993)
- Abdul-Rahman will be involved in the follow up "Landmarks" plot (see June 24, 1993) before finally being arrested later in 1993. It will later be alleged that he was protected by the CIA. In 1995, the New York Times will comment that the link between Abdul-Rahman and the CIA "is a tie that remains muddy." (MacFarquhar 10/2/1995)

November 5, 1990 and After: US Promotes Lone Gunman Theory in Kahane Assassination, Hiding Evidence of Al-Qaeda Links

US government agencies cover up evidence of a conspiracy in the wake of El Sayyid Nosair's assassination of



Investigators remove boxes of evidence from El Sayyid Nosair's residence hours after the assassination. [Source: National Geographic]

controversial right-wing Zionist leader Rabbi Meir Kahane (see November 5, 1990). Nosair is captured a few blocks from the murder site after a police shoot-out. An FBI informant says he saw Nosair meeting with Muslim leader Sheikh Omar Abdul-Rahman a few days before the attack, and evidence indicating a wider plot with additional targets is quickly found. (Friedman 3/30/1993) Later that night, police arrive at Nosair's house and find a pair of Middle Eastern men named Mahmud Abouhalima and Mohammed Salameh there. They are taken in for questioning. Additionally, police collect a total of 47 boxes of evidence from Nosair's house, including: (Lance 2003, pp. 34-35)

- Thousands of rounds of ammunition.
- Maps and drawings of New York City landmarks, including the World Trade Center.
- Documents in Arabic containing bomb making formulas, details of an Islamic militant cell, and mentions of the term "al-Qaeda."
- Recorded sermons by Sheikh Omar Abdul-Rahman in which he

encourages his followers to "destroy the edifices of capitalism" and destroy "the enemies of Allah" by "destroying their... high world buildings."

- Tape-recorded phone conversations of Nosair reporting to Abdul-Rahman about paramilitary training, and even discussing bomb-making manuals.
- Videotaped talks that Ali Mohamed delivered at the John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center at Fort Bragg, North Carolina.
- Top secret manuals also from Fort Bragg. There are even classified documents belonging to the US Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Commander in Chief of the Army's Central Command. These manuals and documents had clearly come from Mohamed, who completed military service at Fort Bragg the year before and frequently stayed in Nosair's house.
- A detailed and top secret plan for Operation Bright Star, a special operations training exercise simulating an attack on Baluchistan, a part of Pakistan between Afghanistan and the Arabian Sea. (Sullivan and Neff 10/21/2001; Sullivan and Neff 11/13/2001; Waldman 11/26/2001; Miller, Stone, and Mitchell 8/16/2002; Lance 2003, pp. 34-35)
- Also within hours, two investigators will connect Nosair with surveillance photographs of Mohamed giving weapons training to Nosair, Abouhalima, Salameh, and others at a shooting range the year before (see July 1989). (Lance 2003, pp. 34-35) But, ignoring all of this evidence, still later that evening, Joseph Borelli, the New York police department's chief detective, will publicly declare the assassination the work of a "lone deranged gunman." He will further state, "I'm strongly convinced that he acted alone.... He didn't seem to be part of a conspiracy or any terrorist organization." The 9/11 Congressional Inquiry will later conclude, "The [New York Police Department] and the District Attorney's office... reportedly wanted the appearance of speedy justice and a quick resolution to a volatile situation. By arresting Nosair, they felt they had accomplished both." (Friedman 3/30/1993; Lance 2003, pp. 34-36) Abouhalima and Salameh are released, only to be later convicted for participating in the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center. Investigators will later find in Nosair's possessions a formula for a bomb almost identical to one used in the WTC bombing. (Friedman 3/17/1995) As one FBI agent will later put it, "The fact is that in 1990, myself and my detectives, we had in our office in handcuffs, the people who blew up the World Trade Center in '93. We were told to release them." The 47 boxes of evidence collected at Nosair's house that evening are stored away, inaccessible to prosecutors and investigators. The documents found will not be translated until after the World Trade Center bombing. Nosair will later be acquitted of Kahane's murder (though he will be convicted of lesser charges), as investigators will continue to ignore all evidence that could suggest Nosair did not act alone (see December 7, 1991). (Miller, Stone, and Mitchell 8/16/2002; Lance 2003, pp. 34-37) District Attorney Robert Morgenthau, who prosecuted the case, will later speculate the CIA may have encouraged the FBI not to pursue any other leads. Nosair worked at the Al-Kifah Refugee Center which was closely tied to covert CIA operations in Afghanistan (see Late 1980s and After). (Friedman 3/17/1995)

(February 28, 1991): Head of Al-Kifah Charity Front Murdered, Increasing Al-Qaeda's Strength in US

Around February 28, 1991, Mustafa Shalabi, head of the Al-Kifah Refugee Center's main US office in Brooklyn, is murdered. Al-Kifah is a charity front with ties to both the CIA and al-Qaeda (see 1986-1993). Shalabi's body is found in his house on March 1. He had been shot and stabbed multiple times and \$100,000 was stolen. Shalabi is

found with two red hairs in his hand, and the FBI soon suspects Mahmud Abouhalima, who is red-headed, for the murder. Abouhalima identified Shalabi's body for the police, falsely claiming to be Shalabi's brother. He will later be one of the 1993 WTC bombers. Shalabi had been having a growing public dispute with the "Blind Sheikh," Sheikh Omar Abdul-Rahman, over where to send the roughly one million dollars Al-Kifah was raising annually. Abdul-Rahman wanted some of the money to be used to overthrow the Egyptian government while Shalabi wanted to send all of it to Afghanistan. Shalabi had given up the fight and had already booked a flight to leave the US when he was killed. The murder is never solved. (Lance 2003, pp. 49-52; Lance 2006, pp. 65-66) Abdul Wali Zindani takes over as head of Al-Kifah and apparently will run the office until it closes shortly after the 1993 WTC bombing. He is nephew of Sheikh Abdul Majeed al-Zindani, a radical imam in Yemen with ties to bin Laden. Abdul-Rahman, also linked to bin Laden, increases his effective control over Al-Kifah and its money. (Miller, Stone, and Mitchell 2002, pp. 82) Al-Kifah's links to al-Qaeda were already strong before Shalabi's death. But author Peter Lance will later comment that after his death, "Osama bin Laden had an effective al-Qaeda cell right in the middle of Brooklyn, New York. A tough look at the Shalabi murder might have ripped the lid off al-Qaeda years before the FBI ever heard of the network." (Lance 2003, pp. 52)

April 24-September 1, 1992: WTC Bombers Have Numerous Links to Al-Kifah Charity Front

On April 24, 1992, Houston pizza deliveryman Ahmad Ajaj and San Antonio cabdriver Ibrahim Ahmad Suleiman fly together from Texas to Pakistan. Suleiman is a Texas contact of the Al-Kifah Refugee Center, the Brooklyn-based Islamist militant organization linked to both the CIA and al-Qaeda (see 1986-1993). Suleiman had begun raising funds for the Afghan war in Texas in the late 1980s, and acquaintances said he traveled to Pakistan several times, carrying a briefcase full of cash to fund the mujaheddin fighting in Afghanistan. When they arrive in Pakistan, they stay at a hostel in Peshawar, near the Afghanistan border, known as the Abdullah Azzam House. Named after Osama bin Laden's mentor Abdullah Azzam, this hostel is owned by Al-Kifah and also houses its Pakistan headquarters. Ajaj and Suleiman stay there off and on over the next several months. Al-Qaeda bomber Ramzi Yousef also sometimes stays there during the same months. Ajaj also allegedly receives explosives training at an Afghanistan training camp with Yousef. His letter of introduction to the camp is signed by an Azzam House official. On September 1, 1992, Ajaj and Yousef arrive together in New York City on a flight from Pakistan. Ajaj is carrying some bomb manuals; investigators will later find the fingerprints of Ajaj, Yousef, and Suleiman on them. Both men are carrying identification cards that give the PO box number in Tucson, Arizona, that matches an al-Kifah branch there. Ajaj is briefly detained at the airport, but Yousef is allowed to go. (McGonigle and Reaves 6/8/1997) He gets into a taxi and tells the taxi driver to drive him to the building that houses the al-Qaeda headquarters in Brooklyn as well as the closely associated Al Farooq mosque, led at the time by the "Blind Sheikh," Sheikh Omar Abdul-Rahman. (Lance 2003) Ajaj and Yousef will later be sentenced to life in prison for their roles in the 1993 WTC bombing (see February 26, 1993). Suleiman will only be sentenced to 10 months in prison for lying to a grand jury about his travels with Ajaj. (New York Times 11/25/1998) A CIA internal report will conclude the agency is "partly culpable" for the WTC bombing, mainly due to its support for Al-Kifah (see January 24, 1994).

November 1992-February 11, 1993: Egyptian Intelligence Repeatedly Warns US about Cells Linked to 'Blind Sheikh' in New York

Beginning in November 1992, Egyptian intelligence repeatedly warns US intelligence that Sheikh Abdul-Rahman's principal mosques in the US, the Al Salaam and Al Farouq mosques in Brooklyn, are "hotbeds of terrorist activity," and that Abdul-Rahman is plotting a new round of terrorist attacks in Egypt. The Al-Kifah Refugee Center charity front is based inside the Al Farouq mosque (see 1986-1993). One Egyptian official later says, "There were many, many contacts between Cairo and Washington." On November 12, 1992, members of the Al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya militant group led by Abdul-Rahman machine-guns a bus-load of Western tourists in Egypt, injuring five Germans. (Friedman 3/30/1993) Between February 6 and 11, 1993, some FBI agents travel to Cairo, Egypt, to discuss Egyptian concerns with officials there. The Egyptians are said to warn about certain terrorist cells in the US connected to Abdul-Rahman but do not specifically warn about the WTC bombing. (Jehl 4/6/1993) Perhaps as a result of these concerns, on February 13, the FBI obtains a FISA warrant and begins tapping Abdul-Rahman's phone calls. (Lance 2003, pp. 103) Shortly after the WTC bombing two weeks later (see February 26, 1993), Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak will say that the bombing could have been prevented if Egypt's warnings had been heeded. (Jehl 4/6/1993)

December 19, 1992: FBI, Having Fired Key Informant, Misses Opportunity to Uncover WTC Bombing Plot

Mahmud Abouhalima, one of the 1993 World Trade Center bombing plotters, calls Emad Salem. Salem had been an FBI informant on a group close to the “Blind Sheikh,” Sheikh Omar Abdul-Rahman, including Abouhalima, but was fired by the FBI some months ago (see Early July 1992). Salem is mad at the FBI about being fired and doesn’t bother to tell it about the phone call, and doesn’t call Abouhalima back. It will later be discovered that on this same day other plotters begin calling chemical companies in search of bomb parts, and the next day another FBI informant will be contacted and asked to help get bomb parts (see Mid-November-December 20, 1992). Salem has bomb-making expertise so it is likely Abouhalima calls him to get help in making the bomb to blow up the WTC. The authors of the 2002 book *The Cell* will note that had Salem still been working as an informant for the FBI at the time of this call, the WTC bombing plot “might well have been cracked before Salem had hung up the phone.” (Miller, Stone, and Mitchell 2002, pp. 84-85)

1993 and After: Milan Mosque Is ‘Main Al-Qaeda Station House in Europe’



Friday prayers outside the Islamic Cultural Institute, on October 19, 2001. [Source: Reuters / Corbis]

The Islamic Cultural Institute in Milan, Italy, has numerous ties to terrorist activities during this period and after 9/11, and the Treasury Department will call the mosque “the main al-Qaeda station house in Europe.” It is initially headed by Anwar Shaaban (see Late 1993-December 14, 1995 and December 14, 1995), an opponent of the current Egyptian regime and a supporter of the Al-Gama’a al-Islamiyya militant group, which is run by the ‘Blind Sheikh,’ Sheikh Omar Abdul-Rahman (see Late 1993-1994).

- It recruits fighters for militant Islamic causes and sends them to Afghanistan for training. One of the recruits, L’Houssaine Kherchtou, who will testify for the prosecution at the trial of men accused of bombing US embassies in Africa in 1998, will say that he knew Shaaban well, adding: “He was my guide. I went there every weekend to be with him.” After studying with Shaaban for some time, Shaaban arranges for Kherchtou and a group of other men to receive military training in Afghanistan.

(Hundley 10/22/2001)

- There is heavy telephone traffic between the Institute and the New York mosque run by Sheikh Omar Abdul-Rahman, and Italian police say it is a logistical base for the WTC bombing (see Late 1993-1994).
- The Algerian militant group Groupe Islamique Armé (GIA) gains influence in the mosque after Shaaban dies in the Bosnian Civil War (see After 1995).
- It creates a “cottage industry in supplying false passports and other bogus documents” according to European intelligence officials, and serves as a gateway to Europe for operatives from Afghanistan. (Sennott 8/4/2002)

After February 26, 1993: CIA Obstructs FBI Investigation of ‘Blind Sheikh’ in 1993 WTC Bombing

After the 1993 WTC bombing (see February 26, 1993), New York District Attorney Robert Morgenthau’s investigators search El Sayyid Nosair’s belongings (see November 5, 1990 and After) and find a bomb formula which was quite similar to the bomb used to attack the WTC. This discovery would link Sheikh Omar Abdul-Rahman’s group to the bombing. The belongings also include a taped plea from Abdul-Rahman to destroy “the towers that constitute the pillars” of the civilization of “enemies of God.” Some suspect this is a reference to the WTC. But the FBI refuses to acknowledge and follow up on the bomb formula or other leads from Nosair. Morgenthau later concludes that the CIA may have pressured the FBI to back off from evidence which led to Abdul-Rahman, as well as blocking other investigative leads (see Late 1980s and After). (Goodman 11/21/1994; Friedman 3/17/1995)

March 4-5, 1993: Suspect Allowed to Leave US Despite Evidence Tying Him to WTC Bombing

A week after the WTC bombing, an Iraqi-American is questioned by the FBI and then allowed to leave the country, despite evidence tying him to the bombing. Abdul Rahman Yasin is a US citizen but spent most of his life in Iraq until 1992, when he returned to the US. Two of the major WTC bomb plotters, Ramzi Yousef and Mohammed Salameh, lived in the apartment directly above Yasin’s. Several days after Salameh is arrested, the FBI searches Yasin’s apartment. They find traces of bomb explosives on a scale, a tool box, and a shirt. In the trash, they find jeans with an acid hole burned in them, and torn pieces of a map showing the route to Yousef’s other apartment. Yasin is taken to an FBI office and interrogated by Neil Herman, head of the FBI’s WTC bombing investigation, and others. Yasin gives information about Salameh, Yousef, and other participants in the



Abdul Rahman Yasin. [Source: CBS News]

bomb plot. Agents observe a chemical burn on his right thigh, making them suspect that he was involved in mixing the chemicals used in the bombing. The next day, he drives FBI agents to the apartment where the bomb was made. Yet Yasin will later be interviewed and claims that the FBI never asked him if he was involved in the bomb plot. Later that evening, he flies to Iraq. Herman will later say, "There was not enough information to hold him and detain him. And the decision was made, and he was allowed to leave." (Meyer and Lichtblau 10/12/2001) In 2002, Iraqi Deputy Prime Minister Tariq Aziz will recall, "I have to tell you that we fear[ed] that sending Yasin back to Iraq... was a sting operation [for the US to] tell people later on, look, this man who participated in that event now is in Iraq, etc., and use it as they are doing now, using many false pretexts, you see, to hurt Iraq in their own way." (60 Minutes 6/2/2002) Yasin will be indicted in August 1993 for his role in the WTC bombing and the US later puts a

\$2 million bounty on his head. In October 2001, that will be increased to \$25 million. In 2002, Yasin will be interviewed by CBS News in Iraq and will confess to involvement in the WTC bombing but says he was not an Iraqi government agent. Iraqi authorities will tell CBS that Yasin is still imprisoned without charge and has been in prison since 1994, but this has not been independently confirmed. Some continue to point to Yasin as evidence that Iraq was behind the WTC bombing. (Meyer and Lichtblau 10/12/2001; 60 Minutes 6/2/2002)

April 2, 1993: WTC Bomber Yousef Placed on FBI's 'Ten Most Wanted' List; Massive Manhunt Ensues



Matchboxes with the photograph and reward information of suspects like Ramzi Yousef. [Source: Jeffrey Markowitz / Corbis]

The FBI places Ramzi Yousef on its "Ten Most Wanted" list, after determining his prominent role in the 1993 World Trade Center bombing (see February 26, 1993). An international manhunt ensues. The FBI works with a State Department program that publicly offers generous rewards and a new identity for informants giving information about wanted terrorists. A \$2 million reward is announced for information on Yousef and a large publicity campaign about the reward is launched, with a focus on Pakistan, India, Malaysia, and the Philippines. Huge numbers of matchboxes are distributed with Yousef's photograph and reward information on them. In early 1995, one of Yousef's associates will learn of the program and turn Yousef in for the reward money (see February 3-7, 1995). The matchbox program will be used for other wanted suspects, such as Abdul Rahman Yasin and Mir Kansi. However, Yousef's uncle Khalid Shaikh Mohammed (KSM) will never be placed on the most wanted list before 9/11, and while there eventually will be a \$2 million reward for him, no similar massive manhunt or large publicity campaign will take place for him, even after he is identified as a mastermind in the WTC bombing, Bojinka plot, African embassy bombings, and many other attacks. (Reeve 1999, pp. 42-43, 56-57)

April 23, 1993: FBI Discovers Follow-up Plot to WTC Bombing; Sudanese Diplomats Are Reportedly Involved

In the wake of the 1993 WTC bombing (see February 26, 1993), Emad Salem is rehired as an FBI informant. Because Salem has the confidence of the group around the "Blind Sheikh" Omar Abdul-Rahman connected to the bombing, the FBI is so desperate to hire him back that they pay him over \$1 million to return. It takes time for Salem to fully regain confidences, but on April 23, 1993, Siddig Siddig Ali approaches Salem and asks him to participate in a series of bombings that he is planning. Siddig Ali explains that he wants to simultaneously bomb four landmarks in New York City: the Lincoln and Holland tunnel, the United Nations headquarters, and the New York FBI office. This will later be known as the "Landmarks" plot. Siddig Ali later tells Salem that he has friends in the Sudanese Embassy who had approved the plan and are willing to help with diplomatic license plates and credentials. Wearing a wire, over the next weeks Salem meets and records others participating in the plot. Many of them, including Siddig Ali, attended a training camp the FBI briefly monitored back in January 1993 (see January 16-17, 1993). (Miller, Stone, and Mitchell 2002, pp. 113-114) The FBI will expand its surveillance of the plotters and roll up the plot a couple of months later (see June 24, 1993). The US will later eject two Sudanese diplomats, Siraj Yousif and Ahmed Yousif Mohamed, for suspicions of involvement in the plot. Both are said to be intelligence agents posing as diplomats. Later in 1993, the US also places Sudan on a list of terrorist countries. (Prial 8/18/1993; Wren 4/11/1996)

October 1993: FBI Records Hamas Leaders Plotting in US but Take No Action

The FBI secretly records top Hamas leaders meeting in a Philadelphia hotel. Five Hamas leaders meet with three leaders of the Texas-based Holy Land Foundation charity (see 1989), including CEO Shukri Abu Baker and chairman Ghassan Elashi. A peace accord between Israel and the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) had



Sheikh Muhammad Al-Hanooti.
[Source: Muslim World League
Canada]

just been made, and this group meets to decide how to best oppose that. It is decided that “most or almost all of the funds collected [by Holy Land] in the future should be directed to enhance [Hamas] and to weaken the self-rule government” of Palestinian and PLO leader Yasser Arafat. According to an FBI memo released in late 2001 that summarizes the surveillance, “In the United States, they could raise funds, propagate their political goals, affect public opinion and influence decision-making of the US government.” The FBI also learns from the meeting that Hamas leader Mousa Abu Marzouk gave Holy Land large sums of cash to get the charity started. Holy Land will eventually grow to become the largest Muslim charity in the US. In a January 1995 public conference also monitored by the FBI, Holy Land CEO Abu Baker will be introduced to the audience as a Hamas senior vice president. One Hamas military leader there will tell the crowd, “I’m going to speak the truth to you. It’s simple.

Finish off the Israelis! Kill them all! Exterminate them! No peace ever!” (Rohde 12/6/2001; Emerson 2002, pp. 89-90; CBS News 12/18/2002) Investigators conclude at the time that some of Holy Land’s “key decision makers [are] Hamas members, the foundation [is] the primary US fundraising organ for Hamas, and most of its expenditures [go] to build support for Hamas and its goal of destroying Israel.” (McGonigle 12/5/2001) Sheikh Muhammad Al-Hanooti is one of the attendees for Hamas. In 1995, he will be listed as an unindicted coconspirator in the 1993 World Trade Center bombing (see February 26, 1993). In the early 1990s, he is the imam at a Jersey City, New Jersey, mosque where at least one of the WTC bombers regularly prays and where al-Qaeda leader Sheikh Omar Abdul-Rahman often delivers incendiary speeches. An FBI report claims Al-Hanooti raised more than \$6 million for Hamas in 1993 alone, funneling much of it through the Holy Land Foundation. As of the end of 2005, Al-Hanooti will still be an imam in the US and will continue to deny all charges against him. (Lyons 6/30/2002) Chicago FBI agents Robert Wright and John Vincent try and fail to get a criminal prosecution against the attendees of this meeting. Instead, the attendees will not be charged with criminal activity connected to this meeting until 2002 and 2004 (see December 18, 2002-April 2005). Vincent will comment in 2002 that the arrests made that year could have been made in 1993 instead. One of the Hamas attendees of the meeting, Abdelhaleem Ashqar, will be not arrested until 2004 (see August 20, 2004), and other attendees like Ismail Selim Elbarasse have never been arrested. Elbarasse, a college roommate of Hamas leader Mousa Abu Marzouk, will be detained in 2004 on the accusation of working with Marzouk to raise hundreds of thousands of dollars for Hamas, but not charged. (Federal News Service 6/2/2003; Feserman and MacGillis 8/26/2004) Oliver “Buck” Revell, head of the Dallas FBI office at the time, will say after 9/11 that the US government should have shut down Holy Land as soon as it determined it was sending money to Hamas (even though raising money for Hamas is not a criminal act in the US until 1995 (see January 1995)). (Associated Press 12/12/2001)

Late 1993-1994: US Investigators Discover Links Between WTC Bombing and Mujaheddin Fighting in Bosnian War



Anwar Shaaban. [Source:
Evan Kohlmann]

The Islamic Cultural Institute mosque in Milan, Italy is dominated by Al-Gama’a al-Islamiya, the Egyptian militant group led by Sheikh Omar Abdul-Rahman. The imam of the mosque, Anwar Shaaban, is a leader of that group and also a leader of the mujaheddin efforts in Bosnia. The Islamic Cultural Institute serves as a transit and logistical base for mujaheddin coming or going to Bosnia (see Late 1993-December 14, 1995). After the 1993 WTC bombing, US investigators will discover heavy phone traffic between the Milan mosque and the Jersey City mosque run by Abdul-Rahman. Furthermore, they learn that bomber mastermind Ramzi Yousef used the Milan mosque as a logistical base as well. (Hundley 10/22/2001) Yousef also prayed at the Milan mosque prior to the WTC bombing. (Gunaratna 2003, pp. 171) Shaaban is a close friend of Talaat Fouad Qassem, another leader of Al-Gama’a al-Islamiya and one of the highest ranking leaders of the mujaheddin fighting in Bosnia. Qassem is directing the flow of volunteers to Bosnia while living in political asylum in Denmark (see 1990). (Kohlmann 2004, pp. 25)

In April 1994, seven Arab men living in Denmark, including Qassem, are arrested. US prosecutors will later claim that fingerprints on documents and videotapes seized from the men match fingerprints on bomb manuals that Ahmad Ajaj was carrying when he entered the US with Yousef (see September 1, 1992). A raid on one apartment in Denmark uncovers bomb formulas, bomb making chemical, sketches of attack targets, some videotapes of Abdul-Rahman’s sermons, and a pamphlet claiming responsibility for the WTC bombing and promising more attacks. Also, phone records and documents found in Abdul-Rahman’s Jersey City apartment show the men in Denmark were communicating regularly with Abdul-Rahman. (McKinley 4/15/1995) But no one in either Milan or Denmark will be charged with a role in the WTC bombing. Danish police will later say that none of the seized documents indicated that the Arab men personally took part in the bombing. The men all are released and ironically, two of them are granted political asylum in Denmark because they are members of Al-Gama’a al-

Islamiya, which the Danish consider to be a persecuted group. (Associated Press 6/28/1995) In 1995, an Italian magistrate will issue arrest warrants for Shaaban and 60 other extremists (see Late 1993-December 14, 1995), but Shaaban will flee to Bosnia, where he will die of bullet wounds in unexplained circumstances (see December 14, 1995). (Hundley 10/22/2001) The US government will later call the Islamic Cultural Institute al-Qaeda's main logistical base in Europe and some evidence will link figures connected to it to the 9/11 plot (see Late 1998-September 11, 2001).

January 24, 1994: CIA Concludes It Is 'Partly Culpable' for WTC Bombing

The Boston Herald reports that an internal CIA report has concluded that the agency is "partially culpable" for the 1993 World Trade Center bombing (see February 26, 1993) because it helped train and support some of the bombers. One source with knowledge of the report says, "It was determined that a significant amount of blowback appeared to have occurred." A US intelligence source claims the CIA gave at least \$1 billion to forces in Afghanistan connected to Gulbuddin Hekmatyar. More than a half-dozen of the WTC bombers belonged to this faction, and some of the CIA money paid for their training. The source says, "By giving these people the funding that we did, a situation was created in which it could be safely argued that we bombed the World Trade Center." Those connected to the bombing who went to Afghanistan include Sheikh Omar Abdul-Rahman, Clement Rodney Hampton-el, Siddig Siddig Ali, Ahmed Ajaj, and Mahmud Abouhalima. (Miner 1/24/1994) Additionally, Ramzi Yousef trained in Afghanistan near the end of the Afghan war, and there are claims he was recruited by the CIA (see Late 1980s). "Intelligence sources say the CIA used the Al-Kifah Refugee Center in Brooklyn—founded to support the Afghani rebels fighting Soviet occupation—to funnel aid to Hekmatyar, setting the stage for terrorists here to acquire the money, guns and training needed to later attack the Trade Center. CIA support also made it easier for alleged terrorist leaders to enter the country." (Miner 1/24/1994) It will later be alleged that the CIA repeatedly blocked investigations relating to Al-Kifah, which was al-Qaeda's operational base in the US (see Late 1980s and After).

January 1996: CIA Report Exposes Militant Charity Fronts in Bosnia; Ties to Saudi Arabia and Other Governments Discovered



International Islamic Relief Organization logo. [Source: International Islamic Relief Organization]


The CIA creates a report for the State Department detailing support for terrorism from prominent Islamic charities. The report, completed just as the Bosnian war is winding down, focuses on charity fronts that have helped the mujaheddin in Bosnia. It concludes that of more than 50 Islamic nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in existence, "available information indicates that approximately one-third... support terrorist groups or employ individuals who are suspected of having terrorist connections." The report notes that most of the offices of NGOs active in Bosnia are located in Zagreb, Sarajevo, Zenica, and Tuzla. There are coordination councils there organizing the work of the charity fronts. The report notes that some charities may be "backed by powerful interest groups," including governments. "We continue to have evidence that even high ranking members of the collecting or monitoring agencies in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Pakistan - such as the Saudi High Commission - are involved in illicit activities, including support for terrorists." The Wall Street Journal will later comment, "Disclosure of the

report may raise new questions about whether enough was done to cut off support for terrorism before the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001... and about possible involvement in terrorism by Saudi Arabian officials." (Central Intelligence Agency 1/1996; Simpson 5/9/2003) The below list of organizations paraphrases or quotes the report, except for informational asides in parentheses.

- The International Islamic Relief Organization (IIRO). "The IIRO is affiliated with the Muslim World League, a major international organization largely financed by the government of Saudi Arabia." The IIRO has funded Hamas, Algerian radicals, Al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya (a.k.a. the Islamic Group, an Egyptian radical militant group led by Sheikh Omar Abdul-Rahman), Ramzi Yousef, and six militant training camps in Afghanistan. "The former head of the IIRO office in the Philippines, Mohammad Jamal Khalifa, has been linked to Manila-based plots to target the Pope and US airlines; his brother-in-law is Osama bin Laden."
- Al Haramain Islamic Foundation. It has connections to Al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya and helps support the mujaheddin battalion in Zenica. Their offices have been connected to smuggling, drug running, and prostitution.
- Human Concern International, headquartered in Canada. Its Swedish branch is said to be smuggling weapons to Bosnia. It is claimed "the entire Peshawar office is made up of [Al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya] members." The head of its Pakistan office (Ahmed Said Khadr) was arrested recently for a role in the bombing of the Egyptian embassy in Pakistan (see November 19, 1995). (It will later be discovered that Khadr is a founder and major leader of al-Qaeda (see Summer 2001 and January 1996-September 10, 2001).)
- Third World Relief Agency (TWRA). Headquartered in Sudan, it has ties to Al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya. "The

regional director of the organization, Elfatih Hassanein, is the most influential [charity] official in Bosnia. He is a major arms supplier to the government, according to clandestine and press reporting, and was forced to relocate his office from Zagreb in 1994 after his weapons smuggling operations were exposed. According to a foreign government service, Hassanein supports US Muslim extremists in Bosnia.” One TWRA employee alleged to also be a member of Al-Gama’a al-Islamiyya carried out a suicide car bombing in Rijeka, Croatia (see October 20, 1995).

- The Islamic African Relief Agency (IARA). Based in Sudan, it has offices in 30 countries. It is said to be controlled by Sudan’s ruling party and gives weapons to the Bosnian military in concert with the TWRA. (The US government will give the IARA \$4 million in aid in 1998 (see February 19, 2000).)

- Benevolence International Foundation (BIF) (the report refers to it by an alternate name, Lajnat al-Birr al-Islamiyya (LBI)). It supports mujaheddin in Bosnia. It mentions “one Zagreb employee, identified as Syrian-born US citizen Abu Mahmud,” as involved in a kidnapping in Pakistan (see July 4, 1995). (Central Intelligence Agency 1/1996) (This is a known alias (Abu Mahmoud al Suri) for Enaam Arnaout, the head of BIF’s US office.) (USA v. Enaam M. Arnaout 10/6/2003, pp. 37 ) This person “matches the description... of a man who was allegedly involved in the kidnapping of six Westerners in Kashmir in July 1995, and who left Pakistan in early October for Bosnia via the United States.”

- Maktab al-Khidamat (MAK), a.k.a. Al-Kifah. This group has ties to Ramzi Yousef, Osama bin Laden, Al-Gama’a al-Islamiyya, and possibly Hezbollah. Both the former director of its Zagreb office [Kamer Eddine Kherbane] and his deputy [Hassan Hakim] were senior members of Algerian extremist groups. Its main office in Peshawar, Pakistan, funds at least nine training camps in Afghanistan. “The press has reported that some employees of MAK’s New York branch were involved in the World Trade Center bombing [in 1993].” (Indeed, the New York branch, known as the Al-Kifah Refugee Center, is closely linked to the WTC bombing and the CIA used it as a conduit to send money to Afghanistan (see January 24, 1994).

- Muwafaq Foundation. Registered in Britain but based in Sudan, it has many offices in Bosnia. It has ties to Al-Gama’a al-Islamiyya and “helps fund the Egyptian Mujahedin Battalion in Bosnia” and “at least one training camp in Afghanistan” (see 1991-1995).

- Qatar Charitable Society, based in Qatar. It has possible ties to Hamas and Algerian militants. A staff member in Qatar is known to be a Hamas operative who has been monitored discussing militant operations. (An al-Qaeda defector will later reveal that in 1993 he was told this was one of al-Qaeda’s three most important charity fronts (see 1993)).

- Red Crescent (Iran branch). Linked to the Iranian government, it is “Often used by the Iranian [intelligence agency] as cover for intelligence officers, agents, and arms shipments.”

- Saudi High Commission. “The official Saudi government organization for collecting and disbursing humanitarian aid.” Some members possibly have ties to Hamas and Algerian militants (see 1996 and After).

- Other organizations mentioned are the Foundation for Human Rights, Liberties, and Humanitarian Relief (IHH) (a.k.a. the International Humanitarian Relief Organization), Kuwait Joint Relief Committee (KJRC), the Islamic World Committee, and Human Appeal International. (Central Intelligence Agency 1/1996)

After 9/11, former National Security Council official Daniel Benjamin will say that the NSC repeatedly questioned the CIA with inquiries about charity fronts. “We knew there was a big problem between [charities] and militants. The CIA report “suggests they were on the job, and, frankly, they were on the job.” (Simpson 5/9/2003)

However, very little action is taken on the information before 9/11. None of the groups mentioned will be shut down or have their assets seized.

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